NEW YORK NEWSDAY JAN 0 8 1993

Haze of Death

EPA study: Secondhand smoke kills

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Washington — Tobacco smoke is killing thousands of nonsmokers every year and injuring hundreds of thousands more, especially children, federal officials said yesterday as they released a massive report that is already sparking renewed efforts to ban smoking in public places.

The Environmental Protection Agency report, whose release was delayed two years by criticism from scientists associated with the tobacco industry, for the first time classifies secondhand smoke as a known human carcinogen — a designation so severe it is shared by only 10 other pollutants, including benzene, asbestos and smoke inhaled directly from cigarettes.

New York State's health commissioner, citing the federal report, said yesterday that Gov. Mario Cuomo will ask the Legislature to outlaw smoking on school grounds, and antismoking advocates said they would target airlines and fast-food restaurants for similar bans.

The 530-page report, which is actually an assessment of more than 30 scientific studies on the subject, paints a dire picture of the health threat posed by secondhand smoke. The 3,000 lung cancer deaths the report estimates are caused annually by secondhand smoke is "twice the number of all the deaths associated with all the toxic emissions in every industrial facility in the United States," said EPA Administrator William Reilly.

The report puts the risk of developing lung cancer due to tobacco smoke at 1 in 1,000 for nonsmokers, and 2 in 1,000 for nonsmoking spouses of smokers. The risk for smokers, by comparison, is about 70 in 1,000. It also says passive smoking annually causes between 150,000 and 300,000 cases of bronchitis, pneumonia and similar infections in children less than 18 months old and worsens the condition of between 200,000 and 1 million asthmatic children.

Several studies have also linked passive smoke to heart disease, but Reilly said those results were not included in the final report because they were less conclusive than the cancer findings, which he called "overwhelming."

A spokeswoman for the tobacco industry's trade association dismissed the study's conclusions as old news based on faulty science.

At the Washington news conference yesterday where he released the EPA report, Reilly and Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan also announced a public-relations campaign aimed at restricting smoking in public places and around children.

Reilly and Sullivan, who are the nation's top environmental and health officials respectively, yesterday stopped just short of urging the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration to adopt an outright ban on smoking in public places.

The decision on whether to enact federal smoking regulations will lie with the incoming Clinton administration, and specifically with OSHA, which has been considering the issue for two years.

"It's far too early to tell how it will be addressed," said Marla Romash, a spokeswoman for Clinton's transition organization.

New York State's antismoking law, one of the strictest state laws in the nation, restricts smoking in most public places to designated smoking areas. The state does allow smoking areas to share the same ventilation system as nonsmoking areas.

State Health Commissioner Mark Chassin announced Cuomo will press for a smoking ban on school grounds and severe restrictions on advertising directed toward kids, as well as a doubling of the excise tax on cigarettes sold in New York.

The New York City Council has already banned smoking on school grounds, effective in April.

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/fyyn0004

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

Here are what the EPA's findings on secondhand smoke mean to you:

- If you are a male smoker, you have a 90 in 1,000 chance of getting lung cancer in your lifetime. But if you have never smoked, your risk of lung cancer from all causes is 5 in 1,000.
- If you are a female smoker, you have a 46 in 1,000 chance of getting lung cancer. If you have never smoked, your chance of getting lung cancer from all causes is 4 in 1,000.
- If you do not smoke, your risk of getting lung cancer from secondhand smoke is 1 in 1,000. If you are a nonsmoker, but live with a smoker, your risk is 2 in 1,000.
- If you smoke and have asthmatic children, your habit increases the frequency and severity of their symptoms in 200,000 to 1 million children with asthma. The risk of new cases of asthma increases.
- Your children may have an increased chance of suffering from bronchitis and pneumonia if you smoke. The EPA estimates that exposure to parents' secondhand smoke will lead to 150,000-300,000 bronchitis or pneumonia cases annually in children up to 18 months old.

Newsday / Mitsu Yasukawa

A man at a Manhattan bar exhales the smoke that the government has now classified as a carcinogen.

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